DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 382 956 CS 214 834

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TITLE Composing Oneself through the Narratives of Others in Writing an Academic Argument.
PUB DATE Mar 95
NOTE 14p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Conference on College Composition and Communication (46th, Washington, DC, March 23-25, 1995).
PUB TYPE Reports - Research/Technical (143) -- Speeches/Conference Papers (150)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Autobiographies; Case Studies; Classroom Research; Higher Education; *Literacy; *Personal Narratives; *Persuasive Discourse; Writing (Composition); Writing Research
IDENTIFIERS Authorship; Literacy as a Social Process

ABSTRACT

A study examined the problems students confront as they try to advance their own ideas when they are also asked to synthesize their interpretations of what others have said in developing a written argument. The researcher spent 15 weeks in a class of 15 students that focused on the theme of literacy. Discussions were observed and taped and protocols collected from six students who were then interviewed. All 15 student essays were analyzed. The focus was particularly on an autobiographical literacy essay and an argumentative essay in which students were to take a position on a literacy issue while drawing on some texts they had read. Although students were encouraged in a number of ways to use their own experiences as a legitimate basis for developing an argument, all but one appeared to rely almost exclusively on the assigned reading. A substantive analysis of how an Asian student went about writing the two essays shows important relationships between personal experience and positions taken on literacy. The way this student represents himself in his autobiography is a function of the position of difference from which he speaks; he experiences a real disjunction between the assumptions, expectations, and requirements that define him and those that define his readers. In the argumentative essay, the student chooses to talk about his concerns through describing others' struggles; it offers insights into the ways students appropriate other texts. (Contains 11 references.) (TB)

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Composing Oneself through the Narratives of Others in Writing an Academic Argument[1]

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ED 382 956

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As a way to think about the uses and limits of students' literacy narratives as a tool for research, I want to talk about a study that traced the emergence of authorship in a beginning college writing class .[2] Part of my project as a researcher has entailed looking at the problem students confront as they try to advance their own ideas when they are also asked to synthesize their interpretations of what others have said in developing a written argument.

To examine this problem, I spent fifteen weeks in a class of fifteen students that focused on the theme of literacy. I took field notes and audiotaped class discussions to develop a broad picture of the classroom context and interviewed the instructor on several occasions to get a sense of his goals for teaching this course. I also collected protocols from six students and then interviewed them in order to understand how they interpreted the assignments they were given. Finally, I analyzed all fifteen students' essays,

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[1]This paper is based on an article, "'Making Sense of My Own Ideas:' Problems of Authorship in an Beginning Writing Classroom," that will appear in the April 1995 issue of *Written Communication*.

[2]By authorship (as opposed to just writing), I mean the critical thinking skills that students use in their efforts to contribute knowledge to a scholarly conversation, knowledge which is not necessarily found in source texts but is nonetheless carefully linked to the texts they read. Authoring a school-assigned text is an inherently rhetorical process that includes the ways in which students interpret, not simply, report information, as well as represent their readers and the larger context of what it means to write in school. In authoring a text, they invoke this context when they begin to account for what readers know, gauging how much given information to include to insure that readers understand what is new. Thus, the content of one's text not only shapes what is said but who will be interested.

As a number of educators have suggested, the labels used to describe students' abilities as writers, such as underprepared, remedial, and basic, are all problematic (e.g., Fox, 1990; Rose, 1989). Following Bartholomae (1979), I use the term "beginning" to talk about student writers who may be adept at thinking through and solving problems, but who lack the options that might enable them to apply what they know flexibly and appropriately in different rhetorical situations.

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examining the strategies they used to advance their own ideas. For the purpose of this presentation, I will focus on the literacy autobiography and the argumentative essay they were asked to write.

In the literacy autobiography, students explored their own practices as readers and writers, which served as a starting point for their inquiry into issues about which others had written. In the written assignment they received, their instructor asked them to consider the following: the role language (including talk) played in their family and different social groups; how reading and writing figured into their relationship with their friends at various stages of their lives; the kinds of reading and writing they had done in school; the significant memories they had of successes and failures; and the role reading and writing played in developing their identity. For four weeks, these students shared their autobiographies in writing groups, read Richard Rodriguez's (1982) *Hunger of Memory* and Mike Rose's (1989) *Lives on the Boundary*, and began to formulate their own theories about what constitutes literate practice, critically examining those conditions which both foster and impede the development of literacy.

After completing their literacy narratives, which the instructor distributed to the class in the form of a packet, the students turned their attention for the next four weeks to writing an argumentative essay while reading such works as E. D. Hirsch's (1986) *Cultural Literacy*, and excerpts from Eudora Welty's (1984) *One Writer's Beginnings* and Alice Walker's (1983) *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens*. Again, they had the opportunity to share their evolving drafts in groups. He told them that they could base their essays both on their own experiences (e.g., their literacy autobiographies) and the reading. Ideally, the argumentative essay individual students wrote would grow out of the issues they began to frame in their narratives. The main statement of the assignment he gave them was this: "Construct an argument that stakes out your position on the issue [of literacy] and that also reveals your understanding of what others have said about this issue." In class, after he read the assignment aloud, the instructor emphasized that his

students should "use sources to create a discussion;" that they should "formulate their ideas . . . [their] own point of view . . . and set up an argument that is based more on conflict [than] agreement;" "choose an issue that is interesting to you;" "map out [your ideas];" and "play ideas off one another."

Although these students were encouraged in a number of ways to use their own experiences as a legitimate basis for developing an argument, I found that all but one of fourteen students appeared to rely almost exclusively on the assigned reading. The patterns seemed pretty familiar. They tended to focus on what different authorities said about literacy; they relied on a well-developed schema for writing comparison essays and reports; and they often left their own position for the very end. At the same time, students' decisions about how to structure their essays can have different origins. In fact, my study revealed that students of different racial or cultural backgrounds may be using the same "student" strategies (e.g., write a comparison, "put your 'I believe' paragraph at the end") for different reasons. One student, Vuong, who I will talk about in some detail in a moment, may have been reluctant to talk about bilingual education until the end of his paper because of what he felt the other students in class seemed to understand about multi-cultural issues in education.

When I re-analyzed the arguments students wrote alongside their literacy narratives, I realized that some students chose some pretty indirect modes of writing to analyze conflicts produced by differences of race and class and to express their own aspirations under some pretty repressive conditions. That is, students discussed what was important to them through summarizing and analyzing the arguments made by the authorities they read, implicitly saying, "This is what I think, too." In fact, their reliance on sources to convey their own ideas may be part of a developmental process that researchers have tended to ignore in favor of attributing this reliance to a legacy of schooling that values recitation and not the purposeful use of information. That students chose to address issues in oblique ways in writing an argument may, of course, be

expected, given the position they occupy in school, especially their placement in a beginning writing course. As one student who I interviewed explained, "I think it's going to be hard to so called 'speak' in this paper with these other writers." The reality is that many of these students have also sat in silence in classrooms in the past, never really being asked to talk about their own ideas. Of particular interest, then, is how students used different sources to assist them in telling their own stories (cf. Hollis, 1994).

Given the time that I have, I can only talk about one student, Vuong, to explain the value of using converging methods of research to understand the logic that motivates his writing of an argument. I begin with a summary and analysis of his autobiography in order to give a sense of how he positions himself (and is positioned) as a writer, in particular how he imposes the conventions of this kind of narrative to tell his story. There is as much indirection here as in the argument he writes.

Vuong's Literacy Autobiography

Vuong, a Hmong student from Laos, came to the United States when he was five and is the first person in his family to attend public school in this country. In the literacy autobiography he wrote for class, Vuong described his family's flight from their homeland at the end of the war, and the struggle he faced as a student who was never really "encouraged" to read very much. After all, he explained, his parents were "never well educated" and teaching him to read was not a "priority." Reflecting upon his first few years in school, Vuong recalls the disparity he felt between the "abundance" of books he saw everywhere around him and the absence of reading materials at home. And he writes about how much he longed to be read to as a child, as he knew other children were, to feel the comfort of listening to the words of his favorite story as he drifted off to sleep. Casting this image in the manner of a fairy-tale, Vuong describes films about families in which the father reads "the shiny white pages" of a book to his child, although the child would never get to hear the end of the story. "But later each night," he writes, "the child

would ask to be read [the] same story again. By hearing or seeing the same word over and over, the child gets a better understanding of how and why the word is used."

Here Vuong draws upon a set of socially specific images (i.e., the traditional romance) in constructing a narrative that serves as a powerful counterpoint to the experiences of dislocation in his own life. This longing he experiences also reveals the frustration that pervaded his first few years in school and his sense of exclusion from the sorts of things that others enjoyed when he asks: "Can you imagine anything worse than for a five year-old kid to be living in the United States, a country where books are abundant and education around every corner not to be read to?" He not only yearns for the material things that were withheld from him until he attended school, but he wants "to be part of a story, even if it is someone else's" (Steedman, p. 77, 1986).

Without much preparation, then, Vuong entered school unable to read very well. By his own account, he would read a few pages and then give up. But with the help of some supportive teachers, he tells us that he developed over the years a sense that school and learning English could be essential sources for his success. In the ninth grade, his first year of high school, he was placed in ESL classes in science, English, and history because his test scores on English were quite low. By his second year, he had only one ESL class and had been placed in "mainstream" classes, except for English. In his last two years of high school, he took both an "introductory" course in writing, as well as a class in "intermediate" writing for "native" speakers. In these classes, Vuong wrote comparison papers, argumentative essays (e.g., "Why television is better than going out into the stadium and watching the real game"), but mostly he wrote reports that entailed doing some research. His previous teachers encouraged him to include his own ideas, but the primary emphasis was on the "details" of writing, that is, "how to format the paper," including footnotes and bibliography.

Vuong's literacy autobiography provides a pretty clear sense of the legacy of schooling that he brings to the task of writing. It also comprises a life-affirming story

that he holds onto in a new and unfamiliar context of schooling that presents him with challenges that on occasion confound him. Its coherence gives his life stability, allowing past successes to shape the uncertainties of the present. At the same time, he cannot erase the sense of exclusion and dislocation he felt in his past. He carries these experiences with him to each new scene of writing.

I imagine that some of you might disagree with my reading of Vuong's literacy autobiography, perhaps wanting to limit or expand what I have observed. It is one of many possible interpretations of his experiences. Moreover, it is reasonable to expect that he has chosen to include certain details of his life in writing this narrative for a class and chosen not to disclose others. Still, with other, converging methods of research, including an interview and a think-aloud protocol, his autobiography can shed some light on how Vuong begins to appropriate what he has read in writing an argument. Again, he was asked to: "Construct an argument that stakes out your position on the issue [of literacy] and that also reveals your understanding of what others have said about this issue."

Vuong's Argument: The Importance of Cultural Literacy

In the opening paragraph of his argument, Vuong focuses on the authors he has read and his statement of a problem: the lack of agreement about how educators will deal with the apparent failures of the American educational system. More specifically, he establishes the importance of certain questions that find their source in E. D. Hirsch's conception of cultural literacy; he maintains that different authors agree that the educational system in the United States is not working; and he points out that each author has a different idea about how to solve the problem. From this discussion, he sets up the expectation that he will write a review of the issues and about what each of these authors has said. What may be less clear is what motivates Vuong to talk about cultural literacy or what he thinks about the issues he discusses.

Following this introduction is a summary and comparison of the authors' positions that spans three and half pages in a five page essay. Vuong uses the sources to structure his essay and seeks some sort of consensus among these different authorities, but embedded within these pages is a question that he poses with some sense of urgency. If there is an increase in cultural illiteracy among those in high school and post secondary education, then, he asks, "So what is the solution to become culturally literate at this level?" Such a question and the answer he searches for in the sources grows out of his own insecurities as a student trying to understand what it means to read and write in a university.

Leading up to this question is a summary of Mike Rose's *Lives on the Boundary*, where Vuong finds repeated images of students who struggle to be accepted in a community that values a certain way of thinking. As well, Vuong reads a passage in which Rose, himself, describes the anxiety he felt—that perhaps Rose didn't belong. At one point, Rose even wonders if the progress that he made as a student wasn't all a "ruse." Such a summary appears to be motivated by Vuong's own concern that those students who have been unprepared by their high school will be "marked" as "outsiders" in the university. It may be the case that after the ninth grade Vuong did well in school, but, like Rose, he carries the experience of being unprepared with him. That Vuong devotes nearly a page to re-telling the story of "Marita," a student who was unsure about how to interweave her own ideas with the sources she was reading, is particularly striking because it seems to provide a way for him to tell his own story. Like Marita, he needs to know what to do, so that he will not be marked as an outsider and fail.

Vuong continues, explaining for several pages Richard Rodriguez's and Hirsch's views about what they believe the sources of illiteracy are, and then he addresses some of the unanswered questions that plague educators and policy makers in his final paragraph. Here he establishes explicitly, however momentarily, his own stance about affirmative action and bilingual programs:

> . . . . I agree with Rose the most. Rose understands that there is a problem among students who are trying their best to increase their cultural literacy; therefore, we must help them as much as possible. Rodriguez beleives that these people must be helped, but who should be helped? Who are really the minorities? . . . . Yes, there is a need to define the people who need help the most so that they could be helped, *but when bilingual programs are not supported I disagreed* (my emphasis). Rodriguez mistake is that bilingual programs in the 70's are not like the ones in the 80's. I think that if he could see how much bilingual programs have changed and helped people he would change his mind.

Identifying with Rose's position, Vuong also begins to clear a path of his own by refuting Richard Rodriguez's analysis of these programs with an implicit reference to personal experience and suggesting that Rodriguez's line of argument may be misguided. This kind of rhetorical move enables Vuong to fall back on the familiar strategy of comparing different points of view, yet he goes beyond such a strategy by providing an alternative to Rodriguez's argument. That is, despite Rodriguez's attempts to underscore the potentially adverse effects that affirmative action and bilingual programs may have for "minorities," Vuong sees the value of helping students in any way possible, perhaps because of his own progress as an ESL student in high school. This point is even more evident in a protocol in which he not only explains why he takes such a position, but why Rodriguez takes issue with current policy:

> Affirmative action has helped a lot of people . . . minority people . . . to go into college . . . a chance they never really had. And bilingual education really has helped students from differen background who have not been able to compete in the mainstream classes. Those bilingual education programs help them to understand more and be able to compete after they

> have completed those programs and go into a mainstream classroom. But I can see where he's coming from . . . Rodriguez . . . that . . . you have to . . . if you want to have an increase in cultural literacy, you're going to have a strong primary and secondary education. Which means you're going to have to have groups . . . classes of students studying together instead of dividing them up. And that way, you're pretty sure . . . you'll be more certain that they will have the same knowledge . . . common background knowledge. I can see where he's coming from.

Thus, with the knowledge gained from Vuong's protocol and literacy autobiography, there appears to be an interesting subtext that suggests how Vuong constructed meaning in his own experience through the stories others told.

If we focus on the finished text, alone, we lose a sense of the drama that took place as Vuong tried to determine how to go about writing this essay. In a protocol he provided immediately after receiving the assignment, he explained that the task appeared to require him to integrate his interpretation of the reading with his own opinions, to use examples, and to take a position by first comparing and contrasting the arguments of three different authors. Although recognizing the possibility of including his own ideas, Vuong sees that the source of his ideas resides, for the most part, in the texts: "pick out something from these authors" and "express our opinions of what these authors have seen."

Interestingly, Vuong builds a very different representation of the task when he considers his own experiences. Like Rodriguez (1982), Vuong reveals a profound concern about how his own assimilation into Western culture and Christian values will affect his relationship to his family, his traditions, and the language that defines who he is. In fact, we learn from the account that he provided immediately after his protocol that he wanted to write about cultural literacy because of the impact the reading had on him as

a student trying to succeed in school and as someone coming to terms with his cultural identity.

> [The reading] has more meaning to me than what I've read during high school. It relates to me so much . . . Rodriguez tells about his separation of his parents coming further from his parents because of education . . . . I've been finding that it's not only me, but it's becoming more in general for Asian students . . . for my nationality. It's that as we become more educated we go further apart from our family and our traditions. We become more assimilated into the American culture. . . for some American kids this won't mean too much. [O]ur class comes from a middle class, so they are not familiar with these books here. And they can't relate very well to these books when I talk to them a few of them. But for a person who is assimilating into American culture this is a big problem. So for this paper I'm trying to get a more . . . an increased understanding of what cultural literacy really means.

Here Vuong focuses more on his own identity and what he wants to learn ("what cultural literacy means") than what the authors say. The source for writing seems to derive from a conflict he identified between his own cultural background and the other students in class ("[T]hey can't relate very well to these books when I talk to them"), not from what the instructor wants him to do (e.g., "He did want us to give examples of what the authors . . . say about their ideas").

However, as we have seen, he does not write explicitly about his own concerns about assimilation and ethnic identity. Nor does he mention the conflict that he feels between his reading of *Lives on the Boundary* or *Hunger of Memory* and his sense that the other students do not seem to understand the full import of these books. Still, it may be too easy to see what may be missing from Vuong's essay; what is more difficult and necessary is to understand that what he has written has both a history and a logic.

If Vuong has done well in school, it may be because he has learned to accommodate other people's ideas. In fact, it was unusual that he was able to move from an ESL track to the "regular classes" in high school, perhaps shedding further light on his tendency to assimilate. Indeed, he has figured out strategies that worked, and his movement to regular classes is testimony to that; now, however, he has been asked, if only implicitly, to challenge the words of authorities he has been taught to trust. Moreover, if his prior experiences tell us anything about Vuong, it is that he is a good student who is torn by his desire to assimilate into Western culture and his belief that he must retain his ethnic identity as a member of the Hmong community. This is evident in a protocol where he describes the educational experiences of Asian students. The result is a text that demonstrates Vuong's understanding of some key issues, instead of one that speaks to what it means to be caught between two cultures. Although relying on sources, he does develop a personally authored text that reflects his concerns about minority education and the kind of support educators need to provide if they are to fulfill the promise they hold out to students.

Implications

I want to conclude by suggesting the importance of systematically examining students' attempts to make sense of and write about others' ideas in context through close, systematic observation. Through using converging methods of research, including students' literacy autobiographies, we can begin to understand particular events by showing how a number of factors come together to enable writing, rather than separating them out one by one and showing their independent effects (Rosaldo, 1989). Moreover, such a tool can help us to specify the legacy of schooling and culture that influence their experiences as writers. If we are to help beginning writers learn how to "integrate new influences and understandings," then we will need to go beyond descriptions of background knowledge that come in the form of such generalities as race, class, and gender.

As researchers and teachers, we can never fully understand another's experiences. There are indeed limits to our using the different tools I have discussed to get at students' thinking and the logic that motivates their choices as writers. For example, it is important to recognize that the way Vuong (re)presents himself in his autobiography is a function of the position from which he speaks and the expectations that pressed upon him in writing this narrative (cf. Hollis. 1994). Writing from a position of difference, he experiences a real disjunction between the assumptions, expectations, and requirements which define himself and those which define his readers. Thus the task of constituting a shared social space under such conditions becomes a difficult and complicated process. Aware that both his instructor and peers would read this account, it's not surprising that he discloses little about the shaping forces of his current situation that might disrupt the story he tells to explain himself.

That Vuong chooses to talk about his concerns through describing others' struggles, especially Marita's, is intriguing and offers us some insight into the ways developing writers appropriate what they have read to convey their own ideas. Vuong's strategies for writing an argument may not be in keeping with our expectations—for instance, using the texts as sources of evidence—but this conflict can become an important site for negotiation and instruction. The key point here is that with a knowledge of Vuong's struggles and concerns, we are in a better position to understand the ways he has appropriated others' stories and to help him think about alternative strategies for advancing an argument, one that foregrounds what he thinks. With teaching and research, then, lie an important challenge: to see students' choices as part of a living process that ordinarily remains hidden from view.

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